

BURDENS OF WAR AND MEMORIES OF HOME

AN INDIANA WOMAN IN WORLD WAR II - JAMES H. MADISON

On a spring day not long ago I visited the American Cemetery at Normandy. I walked carefully among the 9,387 grave markers that stand above Omaha Beach. As I had done before in such troubling places, I tried to find the dead from Indiana as a way to make the overwhelming numbers more believable. It was easy to find Indiana men. But then on this sunny day I read, etched in marble, the following:

ELIZABETH A. RICHARDSON AMERICAN RED CROSS INDIANA JULY 25 1945

Who was Elizabeth Richardson? Why was this Hoosier woman buried among men who died fighting the Nazis? What did she do to deserve a place in this sacred soil?

When I returned home I learned that Elizabeth Richardson grew up in Mishawaka, Indiana. I e-mailed the public library in her hometown. Kind librarians sent me copies of a page from her highschool yearbook and her obituary from the local newspaper. Those two pieces of paper might have satisfied my curiosity, except that (thanks to the Internet) I stumbled



Elizabeth A. Richardson in 1944 as an American Red Cross volunteer.

onto her brother, Charles Richardson Jr., who I learned had boxes of letters, a diary, photographs, and paintings. His treasure boxes of firsthand source material pulled me deep into his sister's life. It became the story I worked on for the next several years.

So much about Liz Richardson seems ordinary. Born in 1918, she grew up in a middle-class family in northern Indiana, attended Milwaukee Downer, a midwestern liberal arts college, worked first for Sears Roebuck in South Bend, and then for Schuster's department store in Milwaukee. In early 1944, as her need to do something for the war effort intensified, she joined the American Red Cross. After six weeks of training in Washington, D.C., she boarded a troopship for England, arriving there in late July 1944. Even her wartime work in England and France might seem prosaic. From a converted



Richardson's marble marker at the Normandy American Cemetery in France.

London bus known as a Clubmobile, she served coffee and doughnuts to soldiers going into or coming back from combat. Compared to the usual war stories told by men, hers seems slightly frivolous.

I eventually learned that Red Cross women providing refreshments from Red Cross Clubmobiles were hardly typical and their work anything but ordinary. I have interviewed several of these women, now elderly, and I've read the letters and memoirs of many more. The word "hero" is readily attached to the men who fought in World War II. These Red Cross Clubmobile women are candidates for similar accolades.

Without firing a weapon Richardson came to know war far better than Americans at home and even better than many men overseas. The heart of her work was listening to and talking with GIs. In a windswept tent camp or on a nighttime

dock near a troopship, she offered doughnuts and coffee to American boys as she smiled and wisecracked, laughed at their jokes, listened to their gripes, and, more quietly, sympathized with their frustration, loneliness, and hurt. "I'm used to the men going over every minute on the line," she wrote her parents on May 28, 1945. In another letter home she lamented, "If you only knew what combat does to these boys-not in the physical sense, although that's bad enough-but mentally."

Many GIs remembered her long after they met, and she remembered them. In France on April 2, 1945, she wrote her parents: "We were cruising past some resting troops, when I heard them shouting 'Hey, Liz! Hey, Milwaukee!' It was a whole unit that we had known in England and we had a wonderful reunion right there on the road. And yesterday I met one of the cooks who had helped us brew our coffee during that week of the invasion of Holland. It's funny how they remember you and stranger yet how we can remember them after seeing thousands and thousands of faces."

Knowing war, certainly this war, meant seeing the best and worst of humanity. Richardson lost her innocence in her first months overseas. Her letters, and especially her diary, reflect a growing weariness

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shared by all who had seen too much. In a Mother's Day letter on April 8, 1945, she recalled the previous holiday; "a lot has happened since then, making me a wiser and sadder creature (the latter in itself a sign of wisdom)."

Americans in the decades after 1945 created a powerful myth of a "good war" that centered on heroic deeds, generous sacrifice, and proud victory. Few then or since would doubt that World War II was a necessary war, a just war, a war the Allied nations absolutely had to win. Richardson believed passionately in the cause, but her experience suggests that the appellation "good war" is far too simple for the complexities, ambiguities, and heartaches she experienced.

Red Cross Clubmobile women not only learned about war's hardships by listening to the GIs, but also experienced it themselves in England and on the European continent. These women knew cold and rain, days without baths, bone-jarring

"If you have a club foot, buck teeth, crossed eyes, and a cleft pallette [sic], you can still be Miss Popularity."

jeep rides, and food shortages. Incongruities abounded. There was often plenty of liquor but, during Richardson's first eight months overseas, no fresh milk and little fruit. Sometimes the food was abundant. embarrassingly so compared to British and French civilian diets, and sometimes it was only K rations. Food was a special hardship for those like Richardson who had a large appetite and loved good food-excepting the Red Cross doughnuts she served everyday ("repulsive, greasy things"). Like many curious Americans, she often delighted in the excitement of living and working overseas, but English and French cultural differences and routine inconveniences at times overwhelmed her spirit.

The Clubmobile women faced too the challenges of living as a sprinkling of females in a sea of men. Richardson wrote soon after arriving in England, "you feel sort of like a museum piece-'Hey, look, fellows! A real, live American girl!" In a letter to a friend she explained: "If you have a club foot, buck teeth, crossed eyes, and a cleft pallette [sie], you can still be Miss Popularity. The main thing is that you're female and speak English. It's certain that all of us will have more than a workable knowledge of the ways of men. 'Men, men, men', one of my co-workers was heard to exclaim the other night, 'I hope I never see another'-a rather vain hope, as she no doubt knew."

> Matters of gender and sex were never far from the lives of Clubmobile women. Unlike some of her colleagues, Richardson remained determined not to marry as long as the war twisted and confused personal relationships. She liked men. Richardson wore perfume and lipstick on duty and off; she went to dozens of dances and parties; she spent lots of time with men beyond slinging doughnuts and coffee; she fell in love with



The American Red Cross prepared this postcard to give to GIs to mail home. Yanks training for combat to come gather around a Clubmobile "somewhere in Great Britain."

two lieutenants, the second passionately so. But she remained resolute when it came to marriage. Richardson said "no" even when her refusal to rush to the altar meant a falling out with the man she loved.

Nor did she succumb to temptations to feign girlish immaturity or flightiness, traits she disliked in other women. She was tall, athletic, physically strong, and not beautiful in the Hollywood way, so that playing the role of little girl was practically difficult as well. More important, she knew that many of these men were still boys and that behaving like a silly girl was not what they needed most.

Much of Richardson's ability to cope with war came from within, from her intelligence, her education, and her personal character. She described herself in one letter as an eternal optimist. Her keen observation of people and places helped her cope. Her education, reading (a part of an earnest effort at continuing self-education), and curiosity enabled her to make comparisons and references that ranged from Gilbert and Sullivan operettas to Siegfried Sasson, John Keats, and Hollywood films. Her interest in art sparked attention to the natural world around her and prompted comparisons to a Bruegel landscape or a Cézanne or Van Gogh palette. On a rare day away from doughnuts and coffee, she went off with her sketch pad or watercolors. Richardson also saw the ugliness of war and its devastating effect on people and places. In a single letter or diary entry, she captured the contrasts in her daily life-of war and tranquility, of ugliness and beauty, of brutality and generosity.



Richardson liked to write. She found pleasure in trying to convey in words what she saw and learned. She wrote well, and her art training helped her draw word pictures of people and places. Richardson took letter writing seriously, not just as an obligation. She wrote engaging and informative letters even with military censors always looking over her shoulder. Richardson liked wit and wordplay, referring, for example, to captured German soldiers as "pouting gentlemen of the Wehrmachtthat-was."

On February 22, 1945, just before leaving London for France, Liz wrote home: "Margaret [Morrison] and I are having our portraits drawn tomorrow at Selfridge's, so keep an eye peeled for the resulting masterpiece." The result, she wrote the next day, was "terrifically flattering." The artist softened her face, emphasized her curly hair and blue eyes, and clearly showed her Clubmobile Captain status.

She wrote also to remind herself of home and to keep alive the connections to her family and to "The Patch," as she called the farm on Dragoon Trail near Mishawaka where her mother, Henrietta; her father, Charles; her younger brother, Butch; and the family dog, Freckles, lived. The property had a barn and large acreage so that her father, an executive at Ball Band, could indulge his dream of becoming a gentleman farmer. Often in letters home. Richardson referred to the home place, closing a letter with, "All my love to the Patch and the contents thereof."

Memories of Indiana's seasonal changes often prompted her imagination. Knowing that her family was vacationing in early August 1944, she wrote from England, "the Patch must be deserted while C. M. and Henrietta frolic and Butch makes en-

"If only I could tell you all about this ... I'll have to talk for a week straight when I get home in 1966."

emies on the east coast. Hope that Freckles is being well fed and that somebody is around to keep an eye on the melons." Two weeks later she imagined: "By this time, you are all back at the Patch, watching the melons ripen-ah-ah-h!" In contrast, Richardson noted she sat "by an open coal fire this August day, for at last the famed English weather has caught up with me." In mid-May 1945, she imagined, "Summer must be almost upon the Patch—it was about a year ago that I left it. Could it have been that long ago?"

Landscape also prompted memory of

home. Soon after she arrived in England, Richardson admitted, "The English countryside made me just a little homesick for the Patch-I can see it now and I can also see Butch cleaning out the chicken house and cutting the grass (joke)." Two months later, with her Clubmobile crew stationed alongside the Eighty-second Airborne, she wrote: "At this moment, I'm sitting in 'the garden,' (we'd call it a back yard) where there is late afternoon sun, a crabapple tree laden with red and uneatable crabapples and convenient stone steps. It could very well be some spot at home, except that there is a sort of permanent chill in the air and the almost continual roar of aircraft." In France, the next spring, she found the countryside so much like home that it made her "quite homesick-the same stretches of newly plowed ground and woods against the sky."

Richardson's thoughts of home occasionally sparked thoughts about the future, as in instructions to her mother about a dress left hanging in a closet in her Dragoon Trail home: "You might as well give the dress away, as well as anything else that's in there. When I get home, I'm going to start from scratch and I think it will be Bonwit Teller's. No-Lord & Taylors.



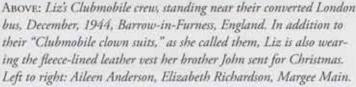
ABOVE: Liz painted this watercolor of a bustling London sidewalk in February, 1945. Civilian and military personnel, including Yanks, pass in front of an American Red Cross Club. At the right, a boy calls to a GI, likely the ubiquitous question "any gum, chum?"

> RIGHT: Liz Richardson loved to paint. Before departing for European war service, she made this watercolor of the family farm near Mishawaka.











Top LEFT: Liz Richardson (left) and Mary Haynsworth with smiling GIs in front of the Clubmobile in Normandy, France, Liz's caption to this photograph when she sent it home on June 4, 1945, reads: "The enclosed masterpiece shows Miss Normandy Base Section (on the left) and Miss Oise Base Section (on the right) snapped informally during their working hours. Miss Oise Base Section is Mary Haynsworth of Greenville, South Carolina, suh. That blur in Miss N.B.S.'s left hand is a doughnut. And it's just as well that it wasn't photogenic."

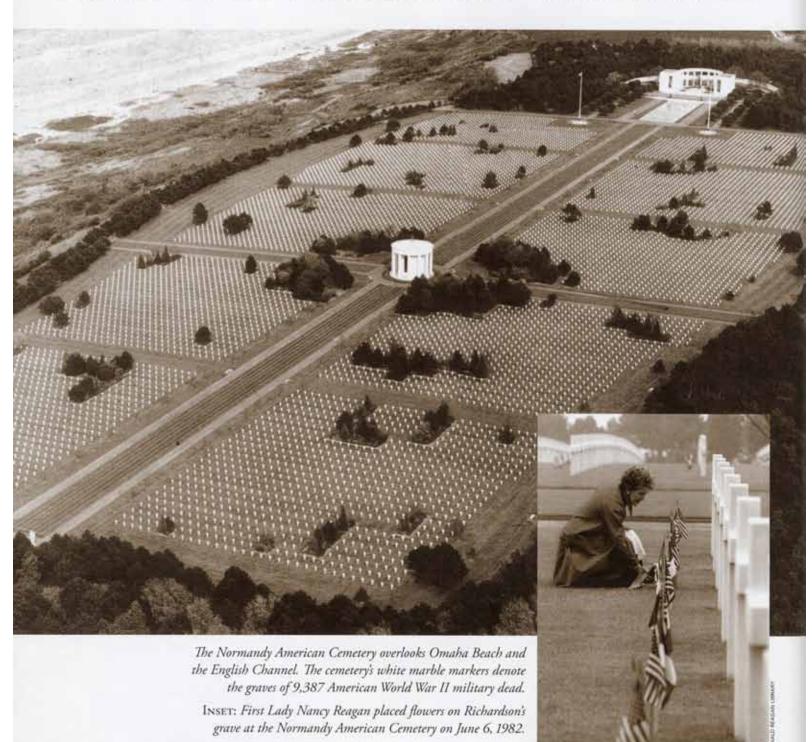
TOP RIGHT: Liz posed with a coffee urn and a smile in the very cold winter of December 1944, Camp Dane Ghyell, Barrow-in-Furness, England.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Teenaged Charley (Butch) Richardson snapped this photo of his sister with their parents, Charles and Henrietta Richardson, as Liz prepared to leave the family's Dragoon Trail farm for Washington, D.C., May 13, 1944. Well, anyway, I'm going to blow my top. You can't imagine how we dream about clothes."

Regaling her family with war stories was another part of the future Richardson imagined. "Someday, I'll be able to tell you about this, without the base censor

leaning over my shoulder and when that comes, we'll have a dawn to dusk session. preferably in the melon season," she wrote, "with plenty of ice cold beer on hand." In another letter she said, "If only I could tell you all about this ... I'll have to talk for a week straight when I get home in 1966."

Like the GIs she served, Richardson longed for mail from home. Mail was erratic, however, because her Red Cross Clubmobile often moved from base to base. In mid-October she wrote, "I haven't heard from Dragoon Trail for more than a month except for that letter from Mother



dated July 16th, which I keep to read over to remind me that I still have home and family." On another occasion she blamed her parents, writing that Butch "seems to be my only steady family correspondent. ... Thanks for that one letter I got last month, though. Yes, I'm mad and yes, I feel neglected. So there."

In letters home Richardson focused on good news and moved quickly around the bad. She seldom whined, yet touches of homesickness and hardship slipped through. Holidays were especially difficult times. "Well, Mother, Daddy, Butch—I thought of all of you yesterday as I gazed into my mess kit overflowing with turkey-a small symbol of home," she wrote on November 24, 1944. "I hope yours was a wonderful Thanksgiving and that our thought waves met somewhere in mid-ocean. It suddenly seemed strange to be sitting there surrounded by those boys, each with their different memories, in an alien land, while the sun did try to come through the dampness. Holidays are bad for the morale." That Thanksgiving meal produced a two-sentence diary entry with a dark mood Richardson seldom displayed to her family: "I ate my Thanksgiving dinner in the enlisted men's mess out of my mess kit. No one was very thankful."

Christmas prompted memories of past years: "Certainly, I will be thinking of the Patch festively alight, Christmas tree and other years from the time that I first remember-all of them very happy memories-as you who share them know. We are working Christmas eve and Christmas

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day, ... so while you are gathering about the tree, I will be slinging doughnuts at homesick G.I.'s." But Richardson added, "there could be worse ways to spend Christmas eve." It was never clear, as she wrote a friend, "who takes care of the Red Cross's morale?"

Richardson's Indiana home was a primary anchor for this American woman at war, a place of security and stability in a time of danger and instability. She held her memories of home deep in her heart and made those fading memories real by writing about melons growing in The Patch, thereby reminding and reassuring herself of what she had left behind and where she would return at war's end.

Unfortunately, Richardson never returned; she died on July 25, 1945, in a military plane crash near Rouen, France, at age twenty-seven. Despite the homesickness and the hardships, she had never regretted her choice to serve in World War II. Richardson wrote her parents in September, 1944, "I consider myself fortunate to be in Clubmobile—can't conceive of anything else. It's a rugged and irregular and weird life, but it's wonderful. That is,

as wonderful as anything can be under the circumstances." To her best friend she had written that fall, "Damn glad I have a [college] degree—it helps so much in making doughnuts. However, I wouldn't trade this for anything else and it has more satisfaction in the doing than anything Auntie has ever done."

Elizabeth A. Richardson is buried in the American Cemetery in Normandy. Perfectly aligned white makers stand in green grass to form row upon row of war dead. Sometimes there are flowers resting at the base of the marble cross at Grave 5, Row 21, Plot A-as there are sometimes at the markers of Indiana men interred above Omaha Beach.

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FOR FURTHER READING For the American Red Cross Clubmobile Web site, visit http://www.clubmobile.org/. | Bess, Michael. Choices under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II. New York: Knopf, 2006. | Hastings, Max. Armageddon: The Battle for Germany, 1944-1945. New York: Knopf, 2004. Kennedy, David M. The American People in World War II. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. | Linderman, Gerald F. The World within War: America's Combat Experience in World War II. New York: Free Press, 1997. | Litoff, Judy Barrett, and David C. Smith, eds. Wêre In This War, Too: World War II Letters from American Women in Uniform. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. | Norwalk, Rosemary. Dearest Ones: A True World War II Love Story. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1999. Reynolds, David. Rich Relations: The American Occupation of Britain, 1942–1945. London: HarperCollins, 1995.